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< Chapter Fifteen: Zara and David VII (Not entirely) (/en/story/127504/chapter/chapter-fourteen-angelique-viii-948760/)

On any given day, when no remarkable events took place and we didn't even have to leave the house for any reason, Angelique stumbled upon something I hadn't even attempted to search for: access to the roof from inside the second floor. I

couldn't find her anywhere, and since she never leaves the house without me, I knew she had to still be inside. While my surprise was not insignificant, everything made sense when I saw that section of the roof, from one of the many rooms we seldom use in the house, open, assisted by a hinge. I could see the white clouds on the other side covering the entire sky, while from the roof descended a metal ladder that seemed to have been unfolded from above from a fixed position.

Upon climbing up, I found Angelique sitting a few steps ahead, cross-legged with her hair tied back as she gazed into the distance. She didn't turn when she heard me.

"...you disobeyed me."

"No, I didn't."

"Technically, this is being outside the house."

"What you said was 'I shouldn't leave the perimeter of the house,' so technically, I didn't violate the order."

"Uh..."

Only this made her turn slightly to look at me with a lazy smile.

"It's a nice spot. We could come up here to eat every now and then."

"We would be exposing ourselves too much. In fact, we are doing that right now."

"... yes, I guess... yes, this is something we can't do either."

Although her smile didn't fade, I could still detect a hint of sorrow in her gaze when her idea was rejected. I can't blame her. We can hardly enjoy anything at all, Angel. I owe you an apology for that as well.

"...let's go back inside. I found an interesting book. It was inside one of the drawers in the closet in my room, as if someone had tucked it away to read later."

"What is it about?"

"A dystopian world. In it, people don't have the freedom to do what they want or pursue what they prefer. Based on circumstances imposed against their will, they have a limited range of actions they can take if they don't want their entire life to fall apart. There are unspoken rules and codes that must be strictly followed if you want to live more or less peacefully."

"...that's how we live."

"..."

"...right?"

"Yes, that's how we live."

"Then, I don't want to read it."

"Why not?"

"..."

"Angelique... come with me."

"Is it an order?"

"No, it's not. I just... want you close."

"Alright, then..."

I reached out an arm towards her, almost

begging her to please join her hand with mine, to offer me, even if just for a few seconds, that warmth in the tips of her fingers that has the power to soothe even my worst nervous episodes.

February 17, 2022

"No get too drunk, okay?"

"We can't drink here, Mom."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean anything."

"Do you see me as someone who can't follow orders?"

"You used to skip classes whenever you could without telling me, even though you knew I would have covered for you if you had asked."

"..."

"You like breaking the rules, son."

"It's not that, it's..."

"Yes, you like breaking the rules. You've always been like that, since you were a child. You never did anything too serious because you were never a bad kid. But if

the sign said don't step on the grass, you would go and step on it."

"Sounds like I was a handful to take care of."

"No, you weren't. Because if you saw someone lying down, you helped them get up without me telling you. You just... didn't like being told what to do."

"..."

"Don't lose that, Alez."

"You're not here, Mom. If I don't follow orders, I'm going to have a hard time."

"You didn't care if we punished you either, did you?"

"Oh, that's true too..."

"Take care of yourself, son."

"You two should take care. Have you decided what to do?"

"I let you convince me to leave, and I was able to convince your father. We had a fight, so we're not together right now, but-"

"Yeah, I talked to him a while ago."

"Well, that. We have a date..."

"..."

"... in four days, our flight leaves from Graz."

"To where?"

"Tenerife."

"And then?"

"Then... we'll decide what to do there. We'll probably stop in the United States, even if it's just for a few weeks."

"How are things over there?"

"Fine. There have been some upheavals, but they were controlled. Europe is the only problematic region right now."

"So..."

"Your father said he has acquaintances in some South American countries. Something from... Peru or Uruguay. We still have to decide."

"You can take it easy once you're in America."

"Son-"

"Yeah, I'll follow you when things calm

down. I don't know how it's going to end, but I can at least tell you that for now, the situation is... under control. If everything goes to shit, I'll find a way to migrate to America with you."

"Son..."

"I'll be fine. Also, I don't know if you've been watching the news, but-"

"I watch them every hour."

"Well, there are regions that haven't been compromised. The other day I was talking to an officer from our brigade, and he told me that an arrangement is being processed between the two countries to send those who have been left out of combat to Switzerland. Maybe in the future, those who have fulfilled a certain quota will also be sent. In that case..."

"As long as you can be okay, I'll be happy."

"I think the same of you, Mom."

"I just ask you to be c-"

"Mom, it's getting late. The head of the security service should show up at any

moment, and if he sees me..."

"Yes, I understand. Well, take care a lot, Alez. Try to rest when you can."

"I'll keep that in mind. See you."

"I love you, son."

"And I love you both."

I hung up and immediately turned off my phone. Then, I stayed silent, staring at the darkened screen while swallowing the lump in my throat. We were both so honest, yet we both lied to each other a lot. I just wanted them to be okay, and they just wanted me to be okay, but I knew Amere sometimes tried to shoot down civilian evacuation flights, and they knew that being on the front meant being on the brink of death every day.

I stowed the phone and rose from the rock I was sitting on, shouldering the AUG that once belonged to David. I let out a sigh, and as I was about to embark on another nighttime patrol around the small region of the forest where I was on guard duty, I heard footsteps behind me.

When I turned, I was met with the beautiful smile of a person approaching slowly.

"I just took over Sick's shift, but you shouldn't be here tonight, Alez."

"There wouldn't have been much difference if I was on duty or not."

"You say that because you're a bitter person."

"Or maybe you care very little about things."

"That's mean. There are things I care about; I just know how to give them a different priority order."

"Yeah, sure."

"You're going to end up dying without having taken it easy for a single day, Alez."

I clicked my tongue. David had told me something similar once, so I felt defeated hearing it again, this time from Zara's lips.

"Alez."

"What?"

"Happy birthday."

"Za-."

I couldn't finish uttering a single word before that girl hugged me tightly around the neck. I let it linger for a moment, but inevitably, I ended up embracing her too.

"Thank you, thank you... now, let's continue with this before Kyd or someone else shows up."

"Whatever you want. Are you going for another round?"

"Yes, I was just about to take another walk around the forest..."

"I've got four flasks of liquor hidden in my clothes."

"You're going to get us in trouble."

We weren't punished, but it wasn't easy to conceal the drunkenness once we returned from the outing.

That birthday...

...

I miss Zara a lot...

The moment I'm writing this

Angelique entered my room abruptly. She didn't knock on the door. It's not that it bothers me, nor does it surprise me, since I was the one who never told her she had to do such a thing.

She informed me that she spotted some activity to the west, so we both grabbed our weapons and headed towards the corner of the house that would give us a better view of that area. It's an almost empty room, like many others, which at first glance looks like a hotel room that has been unused for decades. We placed the nightstand near the window, and on it, I positioned my AWP, the only rifle of its kind that we have. Not because I planned to shoot anyone passing by, but because the built-in telescopic sight makes things easier for me, as replacement for a good

pair of binoculars. One day I'll tell you how I acquired that rifle.

"They were far away. About fifteen blocks or so. No-."

"Yes, I see them. They're walking slowly; right now, they're about 1200 meters away."

"Amere?"

"No, they're not Amere..."

"Then?"

"Stateless. There are four of them. Two with machine guns and the others with assault rifles. They all look very... heavily equipped. They're wearing plate carriers, all of them. They must be new, maybe just out of their base."

"We haven't had any conflicts with them for a long time. Maybe... they've set up a new outpost nearby."

"I don't know, but it's not impossible. I really hope not. If that's the case, we'll have to move. I won't face these guys on a daily basis."

"I should..."

"You shouldn't do anything."

"Hm?"

"I don't want to confront them. If there's a real possibility that they're new recruits making sure their new assigned area is secure, then drawing their attention will only make them run back to report it to their superiors. Considering the level of equipment these guys have... we'll have, at most, an hour to escape if they come after us."

"What should we do, Alez?"

"... I don't know."

As the four strangers approached, walking down that wide street which, unfortunately, bordered the main entrance to our home, I adjusted the scope on my rifle to never lose sight of them. Yes, there were four, but when it came to Vaterlandslos, facing them felt as if you were up against twelve members of Amere. To this day, I don't know if it's because the

members of Amere are too foolish, or if the Stateless are exceptionally well-trained.

"You can kill them."

"What?"

"You can kill them, Alez. If you finish them off before they get too close, we'd get rid of a big problem. We could even make a quick getaway to collect their equipment and hide their bodies. If they are new recruits, their superiors might think they fled, and-."

"Angel."

"..."

"You must hold me in high regard if you think I could take out four men quickly enough before they have a chance to hide and then disappear among the buildings."

"Huh..."

I'm perfectly aware that Angelique lacks experience; I only concern myself with pointing out her own lapses in reasoning

without trying to sound like I'm giving her a lesson. I want her to become aware of those things on her own. I want...

I want so many, many things.

"So..."

"That's right, all we can do is wait. Wait and... maybe pray that they decide to turn around and not come back. Angelique, whatever happens after this, I want you to prepare your backpack to-."

"Escape."

"-to get away from here at any moment. I don't need to tell you what to bring; you know well enough. I really hoped to stay here for much longer, but there are enemies it's better to flee from..."

"I understand."

There was a hint of nervousness in her voice. Both she and I were somewhat reluctant to stay and live in this... mansion, though for different reasons. That said, we both adjusted perfectly to this life. We are

comfortable. We enjoy waking up early and checking how much gas and food we have left. We relish waking each other up when one of us oversleeps. We take pleasure in our daily tasks. She enjoys going down to the basement to let me know that the meal is ready, and I enjoy taking the book from her hands to tell her it's time to sleep. We enjoy. We enjoy each other.

"They stopped."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

The four men came to a halt. They all looked to their left, still about nine hundred meters from our position. Only two of them raised their weapons, ready to face whatever they encountered. Out of sheer habit, I could memorize what they carried: two of them had an extremely similar rifle model, some variant of the M4. The other two differed, one carrying an MG5 and the other a MAG 58.

"They're... seeing something. No, I think one of them heard something. I'm not very sure. No, I am sure. The one at the corner heard something and alerted the others; now he's signalling towards a specific house and— shit!"

"What happened?"

I saw it all through the scope.

Seven or eight bandits emerged from all directions. The Stateless were mercilessly gunned down, and even though the plates saved some of them, the bandits approached and finished them off with shots to the head. It was impressive, considering that all the bandits carried only pistols. And like disgusting, filthy cockroaches, they took the weapons from the Stateless and everything they had in their pockets, then disappeared... it all happened in seconds.

For some reason, I was stunned.

It was strange.

How many times had Angelique and I done something similar? However, seeing it from the outside was... it was hell. Like a cheap movie, I saw four lives fade away as if they were nothing. With a past, with a purpose, with certain aspirations... and now, nothing. The bandits revelled for just a couple of seconds before disappearing among the houses, each going in a different direction. And all of that... less than a kilometre away from us. Angelique wasn't looking out the window; she was looking at me as I finished processing it. Truly, how... how fragile, volatile the world we live in is. Nothing can assure us that Angelique and I won't be next.

For just a fraction of a second, a paralyzing fear overwhelmed me. I pictured Angel and me being gunned down in that way, and everything around me turned gray.

"Alez...?"

Her voice brought me back, and I

stopped peering through the scope to look at her.

"... everything is fine, Angelique."

"Eh?"

"Yes, everything is fine. We're out of danger."

"I don't understand."

"You don't have to understand, just-."

"I want to understand, what is-?"

Before she could finish that question, I set my rifle aside and leaned over her, enveloping her with both arms as if not to allow her to escape ever. Such a hug lasted no more than two seconds; soon, I let her go.

"..."

"..."

"Alez...?"

"Everything is fine. Those Stateless won't come any closer."

"I heard shots."

Exactly, they won't bother us anymore."

"Alez..."

"They won't bother us, Angelique. Everything will continue as it has until today. We'll focus on keeping the bandits at bay. They know we're here, but each one individually values their own life enough not to come close, so..."

"..."

"We're safe."

I never expected to experience a situation like that, but Angelique approached me and... took my face in both hands. She came close enough that even a whisper sounded like a shout, and despite the height difference, she made her voice prevail over my ears more than even my own thoughts.

"We're going to be okay."

What foolish words. What did she mean

by that? Of course, we'll be fine. We have more than enough escape plans for almost any situation. Nothing could catch us off guard. Of course... of course, we'll be fine. It just makes me wonder: What has she seen in me that I'm not able to express in these words?

Damn, I'm terrified. Everything is so uncertain. I can't determine if staying here was a success or a mistake.

"Yes... yes, we're going to be okay."

It's almost as if we both know that was a lie. We both believe in each other. But neither of us believes in the world around us. Angel, you deserve something much, much better than this.

. . .

I forgot what it was that I wanted to write about. I know I had something in mind, a specific story about my past, but I can't remember which one exactly...

Ah...

I apologize; I can't recall.

Any excuse I give will sound nothing more than a lie.

. . .

Hey, reader, under what circumstances are you reading this? Did you find my writings among the remnants of my room after you killed me?, Or perhaps you stumbled upon them abandoned in the house after we were forced to leave? Or... maybe, are you reading this from the comfort of your room while I'm still out there fighting? All those options are possible, and letting your imagination run wild is so, so much fun...

A few chapters ago, I said that maybe I wouldn't have done so badly as a writer, but... right now, I think I would have done terribly. I don't know how to make an audience empathize with my characters or make people interested in what I tell... I just tell stories. This is me, and this is

Angelique.

There's nothing more to it, really.

You shouldn't keep reading.

There's... there's nothing more interesting waiting ahead.

It's just me, it's just Angelique...

It's just the two of us, describing the world before us.

No story worthy of a hero adorned with medals awaits beyond these pages.

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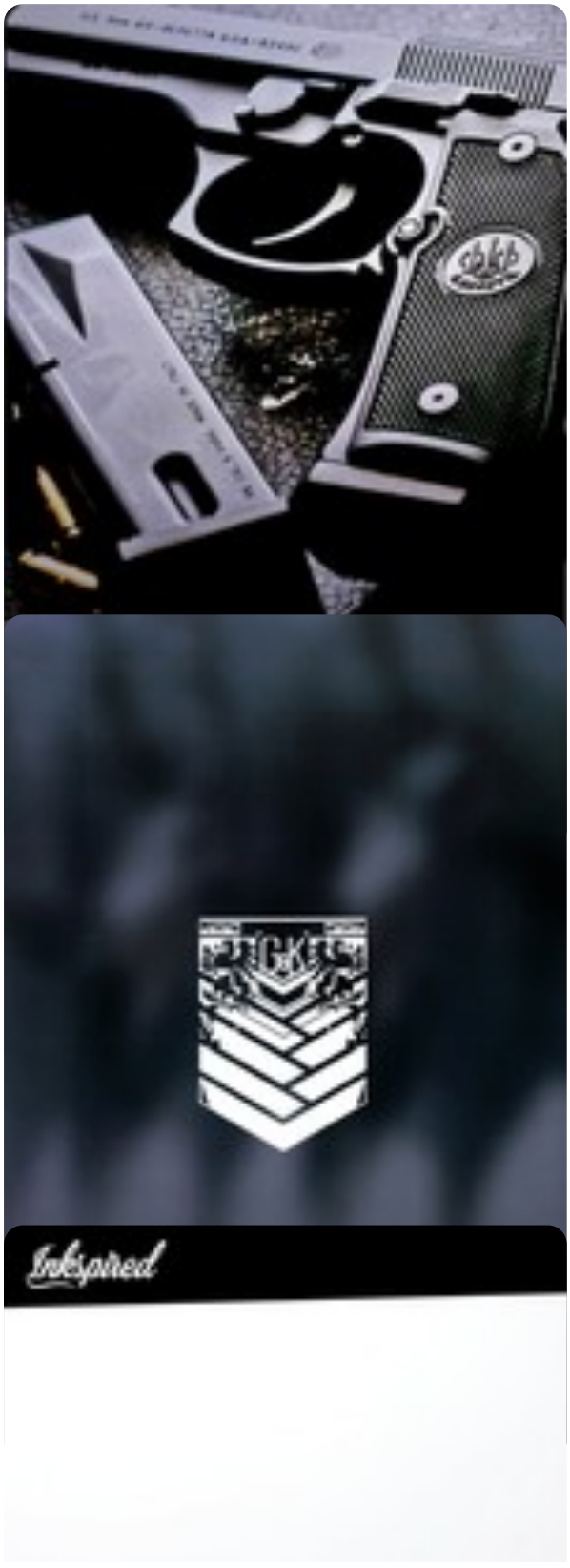

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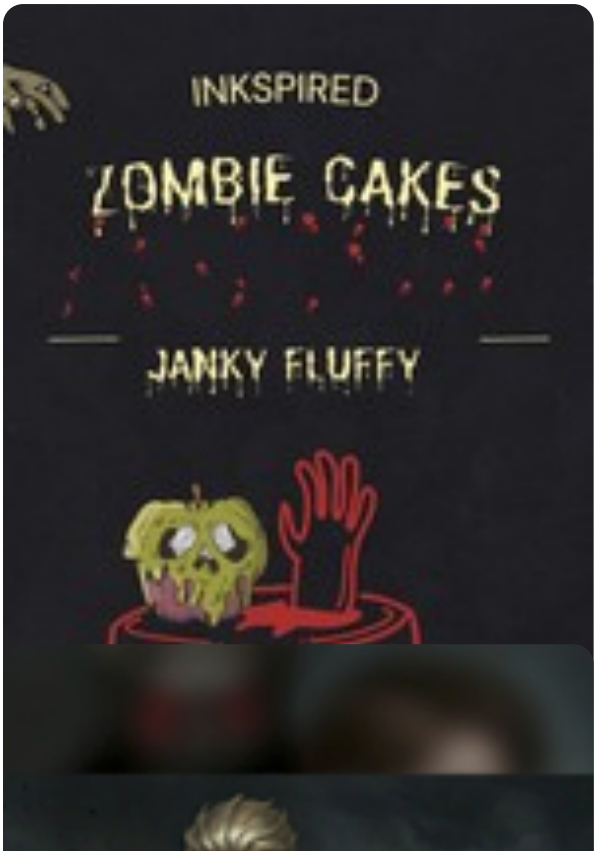

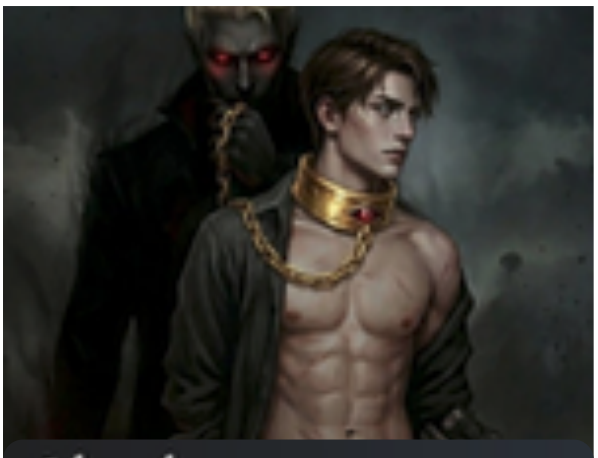

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